
Conversation with the Leader:

Questions and answers

11 February 2021

1. i) **What is happening to Weybridge Hall and why has it been allowed to stand derelict for so long?**

ii) Last year we in Weybridge heard the good news that Weybridge Hall would have a renewed purpose as a cinema one again, yet it stands derelict and empty still. Are there any updates if this plan is still going ahead?

Planning permission was granted in March 2018 to convert Weybridge Hall into a cinema, with 5 affordable units on the upper floors. Since then the Council have engaged with several cinema operators who were interested, but ultimately, none were financially viable schemes.

To mitigate any further associated design costs, and as approved by Council last September, Officers have paused all design work relating to a cinema but continue to progress the design of the residential element in order to prioritise the delivery of much needed affordable housing.

Officers, in conjunction with the Council's framework contractor, Kier Construction, are now in the process of procuring the residential scheme and repairs to the Golden Jubilee clock, with works programmed to commence on site in July 2021 and be completed late September 2022.

The Council remain open to options regarding the future use of the ground floor.

- 2. A number of questions were submitted asking why free parking for electric cars have been abolished in Elmbridge car parks when the government is encouraging people to switch.**

We are committed to carbon neutral future for this council and that will extend to encouraging our residents to do all they can to support our ambition. We also focus on supporting other sustainable forms of transport such as cycling and, of course, walking and will be installing electric vehicle charging points in our key car parks.

The specific issue of free parking in our car parks comes back to the difficult decisions we have to make to safeguard services for our residents. We are having to plan for modest increases in our income, which includes parking charges in our car parks, as well as making savings and lobbying Government for additional financial support. We are committed to a carbon neutral future and we are committed to delivering essential services for our residents, but within those ambitions difficult decisions have to be made.

- 3. Can you advise what is the process and timeline for applications for the Retail and Hospitality Lockdown Grant announced by the Chancellor on 5th January? The Dept of Business Energy and Industrial Strategy advise that the local council will administer this grant.**

Following the Government announcement, guidance to local authorities on the administration of the January lockdown grant and one-off payment for business rate payers was issued 13 January 2021. Elmbridge made payment of the lockdown grant and one-off payment on 19 January to 640 businesses we were able to identify as eligible from the records we already held. Please check [our website](#) for full details of the grants as we continue to make payments to eligible businesses.

More than 670 businesses have now received the lockdown grant and payment, worth over £5,000,000 paid to Elmbridge businesses.

Elmbridge has also launched an Elmbridge Discretionary grant for businesses that are not eligible for the lockdown grant and one-off payment, with full details and online application available on [our website](#).

4. When considering the draft Local Plan, will underperforming areas of Green Belt be reviewed, and perhaps have that status removed where an alternative use that might provide better benefits to an area has been identified and suggested.

We have already undertaken a variety of assessments on our Green Belt land and its boundaries, these studies are available on our website if you'd like to review the detail. These assessments will enable us to demonstrate that all available options to meet our housing need have been properly assessed. And will be used to inform the spatial strategy and any site allocations in the draft local plan.

In addition, no decision has been made by this administration as to whether there are exceptional circumstances, as set out by national planning policy to amend the boundaries in Elmbridge. That decision can only be made once the entire evidence base has been complete.

5. There has been a collapse in demand for retail space which is always conveniently located at the heart and not the fringe of local settlements. So, what is EBC doing to explore how surplus retail space (including its own) can be converted to meet its own housing demand?

While Elmbridge Borough Council (EBC) does own several retail premises in its portfolio it has been fortunate enough that all our retail properties are let and income producing. Where retail tenants vacated EBC have re-let the properties very quickly. EBC has worked closely with all its retail tenants during the pandemic and in a very limited number of cases where they have no online income EBC have deferred rent payments, and in one instance given a short rent holiday. Many tenants have benefitted from rates holidays to support them through the pandemic, as well as other grants.

Across the Borough EBC are well aware that a number of retailers have been struggling and has provided advice regarding grants and where they may get other financial support. There are signs that a recovery will begin later in 2021. This will present opportunities for new businesses to take up some vacant high street space, but not all. There will be a repositioning of many high streets over time with core retail areas shrinking, presenting more opportunities for alternative uses and development.

6. When will pavements along Brooklands Road be cleaned again. There was only small part done on one side.

With regards to when pavements along Brooklands Rd will be cleaned, our contractor has been carrying out edging of the back lines on Brooklands Road, and will be continuing with this over the coming weeks.

Residents can also make specific cleaning requests through our [website](#).

7. EBC has invested over £90 million in buying investment properties including retail centres in Elmbridge. Sadly, much of this investment took place at the top of the market and EBC has incurred write downs in value - including over £5 million in 2020. Why has EBC speculated like this with public money and engaged in an activity in which it has no core competence?

We hold property for the long-term performance and not purely for year on year growth. Property has for many decades been one of the strongest long-term performers and delivers not only long capital but income growth. Any loss or gain is only realised if an asset is sold. To date EBC has not sold any Investment Assets since its first purchase in 2012.

The reduction in valuation you refer to is mainly due to residential properties being transferred to EBC's Housing Company during 2019/20.

We have Council officers who are qualified chartered surveyors and we also use independent valuers to establish the correct valuation for any purchases we have undertaken.

The current situation with the Pandemic does create a new landscape for the property market but due to our limited exposure to the retail sector we are confident that the Assets although expected to drop in value, will appreciate value over the medium to long term. We are not in the business of buying and selling properties in the short term. All the properties we have purchased are for the long term or for regeneration /housing development purposes.



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8. EBC has about £17 million on its balance sheet by way of CIL contributions of which half relates to unallocated amounts. This represents about four years' worth of annual spend. Why is this sum so high and why can EBC not reinvest unallocated funds back into the community more quickly?

The council started charging the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) in 2013 and by the end of December 2020 had collected just under £37m to help fund strategic and local infrastructure projects that help support the growth of our communities.

There is currently just over £13m in unallocated funds.

We co-ordinate the allocation of funds through an application process whereby we invite bids for funding from our infrastructure providers and local community groups and organisations on an annual basis.

This is done on an annual basis, which ensures funding is invested into our communities as soon as possible whilst maintaining a transparent, fair and consistent process. Running the process annually creates an equal opportunity to our infrastructure providers and communities to bid for the monies available and for our Councillors to be able to consider and compare applications. In addition, running the process annually allows sufficient time for the funding pots to build back-up.

The balance sheets may appear artificially high as we were unable to hold the CIL allocation boards last March due to the Pandemic and lockdown.

Regarding this years' allocation process, the funding round for projects opened yesterday. We would strongly encourage our communities to review the information on the CIL funding page of our website on how to [submit an application](#).

The deadline for applications is Wednesday 31 March 2021, and we will be holding the Local Spending Boards in June and July.

- 9. Unless a member has either a conflict of, or a pecuniary, interest in an agenda item, why are abstentions from voting allowed at committees? Councillors are elected to make decisions, not sit on the fence when it's convenient for them to do so.**

Members of a committee have voting rights and are thereby entitled to exercise their right to vote when a vote is taken. This is not a requirement to vote.

- 10.Regarding dog restrictions in open spaces. Would the council consider introducing Public Space Protection Orders designating certain parts of the borough's open spaces as off limits to dogs in order to more fairly address the differing needs/wishes of residents?**

The Council manages dog related issues through education and information awareness using site notices, leaflets, and face-to-face conversations with individuals (the owners or carers).

We believe this to be a fair and balanced approach. However, in certain cases if this approach fails to resolve the dog issue, we will work in partnership with our legal team and Surrey Police to identify the issues, and find the best way forward.

We consider the use of Public Space Protection Order's to be a last resort for dog control issues, such as encounters with persistently uncontrolled dogs. We would rather work with dog owns and dog walking businesses to ensure that everyone can use our beautiful open spaces respectfully.



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11.If the new Local Plan were to commit to a housing target of 633 but also respected the overwhelming views of residents that Green Belt should remain protected, how would EBC avoid turning Elmbridge in to an ugly London suburb by having to approve indiscriminate high-density housing applications.

If we were to meet our housing need only in the urban area this would increase densities and possibly the height of buildings. We would need to have new policies on design in the draft Local Plan, and we would expect new development to be innovative in design and utilise higher densities whilst respecting local character.

It is more than likely that if we were to respond to local housing need only in the urban area, there would need to be a change of character in many areas of the Borough. Option 1 of the Regulation 18 Consultation held in September 2019 gives a good example of what this might involve in terms of sites and the number of units per site.

12.Will anything be done to calm traffic along Rydens Road?

It has been pointed-out that this is not an issue just with Rydens Road, but I can only speak of our road being that I'm a resident.

I would be grateful of your thoughts on how to improve safety, noise, pollution and stress levels.

I include my concerns about the use of Rydens Road as a through road by heavy good vehicles. I understand this is likely to the lifting of the weight restriction on Walton-on-Thames new bridge. This is also adding to the safety, noise, pollution and stress levels.

Rydens Road is an active enforcement site for Surrey Police. It has been identified for inclusion at the next meeting of the Surrey Police/SCC road safety partnership – this is the forum where sites are discussed by road safety specialists, with a view to prioritising locations for action – this is on 6 May.

At the next Road Safety Working Group meeting Surrey Police are seeking an update from SCC's perspective.

13. EBC has raised significant sums over the years from Oxshott by way of CIL contributions on new developments. Does EBC think that it has made proper reinvestment of that money in Oxshott by way of infrastructure improvements?

Funds collected through CIL are allocated in two main ways, either through the local spending boards or through the strategic borough wide schemes. For these larger strategic schemes, the Council acts as a co-ordinator, entering into discussions with providers such as SCC or the clinical commissioning groups to understand the capacity of and demand on our infrastructure to identify improvements requires to mitigation the impact of new development. This information is used to create a Strategic Priority Programme (SPP) list, which is a pipeline of priorities, to enable a proactive and strategic approach towards the funding and delivery of infrastructure. This list is reviewed by the cross party CIL working group and then agreed by Cabinet.

In terms of the local spending boards Oxshott forms part of the wider local spending area, covering Cobham & Downside and Oxshott & Stoke D'Abernon, for which there is currently (December 2020) circ. £1.5 million allocated to local projects and just under £350,000 in unallocated funds. The unallocated funds are available for allocation in the 2021/22 application round, which opened yesterday. Further details including the closing date can be found on the [CIL funding page of our website](#) if this is of interest to our communities. See link below:

14. Fifteen percent of funds raised from the Community Infrastructure Levy are ploughed back into selected projects in the Town from whence they were generated. Why can't the same principle be applied to car parking revenue that produces a net surplus each year of some £2million? Currently, these surpluses are simply added to the same pot used for general budgetary purposes across the entire borough, whilst Towns suffering traffic over-congestion don't receive any benefit for the inconvenience.

Over the years, councils have had their incomes reduced to the point that parking charge income has become a much-needed source of funding to run essential services for the whole community.

Due to the pandemic over the last year we have seen the income from parking plummet, and we are not assured it will return to pre-pandemic levels.

We will work through other funding sources and strategies to deliver essential services to our community.

In terms of traffic congestion, we are promoting alternative forms of transport such as cycling and walking to help ensure we meet our carbon neutral ambitions.

15. You have recently referenced the publication of the Surrey Place Ambition but there is no mention of this on the Elmbridge website. Can you explain what this is, your role, and the benefits to Elmbridge particularly in relation to working with Surrey?

The Surrey Place Ambition is a joint piece of work lead by Surrey Future. It has been collectively produced by Surrey County Council (SCC), Boroughs, Districts and the 2 Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP). It brings together the Local Plan aspirations, LEP investment plans, SCC's Local Transport Plans and a raft of other work that all feed into SCC's Surrey Infrastructure. More information on the Place Ambition can be found here on [Surrey County Council's website](#).



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16. EBC claims an urgent need for affordable housing. Yet EBC has collected £15.7 million in affordable housing contributions since 2011 but has only spent £3.5 million. Why is EBC seemingly sitting on its hands and doing so little to address this urgent need?

There is an urgent need for affordable housing within Elmbridge. There is an array of evidence to back this up – see for example, [Housing in Elmbridge: Facts and Figures](#), published December 2019 for an overview – available at:

With respect, we do not believe that the question is using the correct figures and has significantly understated the amount of funding that the council has spent since April 2011 using section 106 contributions for affordable housing. In actual fact, the council spent £7.452m of these receipts between April 2011 and March 2020 on affordable housing using these contributions. This figure represents the total spend reported to Central Government through our annual Local Authority Housing Statistics returns – the yearly figures can be seen on the [Government's website](#) (This is more than double the figure quoted)

The sum of £7.452m represents spend. The actual funding committed to affordable housing delivery / supply is actually significantly higher. As at 30 September 2020, the council had actually committed just over £13m towards affordable housing since 2011, with £3.69m of that commitment having been made since November 2019. These funds will move from commitment to spend as schemes proceed and milestones for payment are made, so we expect this to translate to higher levels of spend (and output using these funds) in the coming years.

The council has to collect the money before committing and spending it. We also want to make sure that spend is targeted at specific priorities and that housing associations and others seeking funding actually need it to deliver the scheme put

forward. We are in regular contact with housing associations exploring opportunities to use the Affordable Housing Enabling Fund to increase the supply of affordable housing in the borough and in recent years, the council has resumed direct involvement in the delivery of affordable housing, both on its own and via its housing company, EBC Homes Ltd. We will continue to look at directing funds where they can meet needs and would dispute any claim that we are “sitting on our hands”.

17. Parents are being forced to now pay for 1hr min parking to use Churchfield Car Park to pick up our children from local nursery. How can you morally justify removing the 30mins parking charge option when so many local people were making use of this option?

Some parents have a car parking permit to use Churchfield Car Park and there is a consensus to change its timing due to Covid.

We have operated a permit scheme successfully with the nursery for some two years now, as the nursery concerned does not provide drop off parking for its customers/parents.

There are almost 100 permits operating that provide free parking for parents daily (Monday-Friday) from 8.00 - 9.00 am and 5:30 - 6:30 pm which are the times first agreed with the nursery.

We appreciate that the car park maybe more convenient but there are on-street parking options available where parking is free.

18. You may be aware of the Council's recent commitment to provide CIL funding to assist in upgrading the existing swimming pool at Claygate Primary School which will enable the facility to be opened to the community. The funding was awarded in clear recognition of the lack of provision within this part of the borough. Construction is due to start in July 2021 enabling the pool to open to the community in December 2021. We are now seeking to raise the remainder of the funds needed to deliver the project in the way the community hoped. This truly is a community project offering far reaching benefits which will be enjoyed by all when we are able to do so. We would like to understand what other support the Council is able to offer to ensure that this much needed facility is delivered.

The council has produced [Elmbridge Leisure Facilities Strategy 2017 - 2035](#) which identifies what future leisure provision will be required to accommodate anticipated population growth in the borough. The Claygate Primary School Pool Project supports the findings and recommendations from the Strategy. The opening up of Claygate Primary School pool to community use as a result of the proposed development will only benefit the borough's community pool provision locally. The geographical location to the south of the borough is also beneficial to residents, since the council's own public pools are both located in the north.

As well as the award of CIL funding, officers have previously provided a letter to support future funding applications and are also available to direct the School to other sources of grant funding both locally and nationally.

19. The footpaths in Weybridge High Street are in very poor state and have been so for many years. A patchwork of old repairs, uneven, and with utility grids of all varieties and sizes littered everywhere. They are a disgrace to the town and the Council. There have been promises in the past, the last a few years ago but nothing has changed. A few years ago Ellesmere Road was treated to a new pavement stretching many hundreds of yards. Yet hardly anyone walks along Ellesmere Road, but many hundreds walk the High Street. Why was Ellesmere given priority?

Footpaths are maintained by Surrey County Council. You report damage to footpaths and other highways issues through the [Surrey website](#).



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